



TEN-YEAR-OLD BOYS see the camera at their stone-carving workshop in Hu'an, Fujian Province, China.



UNDER-AGE SHOEMAKERS on the job in Jinjiang, Fujian Province. THIS PHOTO BY CHAI GUO, COURTESY BY USA MAIL/LEO

# Bruised flowers: China's hidden army of child laborers

Critics say up to 13 million Chinese children endure slave-like conditions working long hours for low pay

By CALVIN and LISA MacLEOD

**H**a Changjun was desperate to escape the poverty trap in Wuxi County in southwest China's Sichuan Province. He couldn't believe her luck when a fellow villager named Changyan offered her work at a joint-venture factory in distant Beijing. "A joint venture means a foreign company, where the work is easy and the pay is good," explained Changyan. Even when the reality proved to be 16-hour days, seven days a week, washing and drying vegetables for only 200 yuan a month, he was still keen to seize her

offer. He was still keen to seize her offer when a camera was produced, and the 20-something owner appeared with a guard dog. The report on child labor by the China Labor Bulletin concluded that "the existence of child workers is not a natural consequence of rural poverty." Rather, the culprit is China's educational policy, under which "local governments must raise their own funds to provide education," Hou Wenhuo, director of the In-migrant Migrants Legal Aid and Research Center, a Beijing-based NGO, also blames the crisis on local education.

Christmas-tree lights on a production line with dangerous wires hanging haphazardly. Despite working for many months, none had been paid. When asked if they missed home, all of the 14 kidnapped children have been rescued. Coastal areas like Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong are home to some of the worst abuses. At one of hundreds of private workshops in Fujian's Shu'an County, 14-year-old Ala was busy recently carving stone lions. On a nearby wall, a propaganda slogan declared "Strictly prohibit child labor," as Ala expertly switched between electric and manual

tools. In that county, at least 40 percent of children drop out of school after they turn 15," Hou explained. "It is getting increasingly expensive to send children to school, and parents prefer to spend money on things like building houses." Girls constitute a much higher percentage of dropouts than boys, as parents are reluctant to waste money on daughters who will only be "married off" to other families. Thirteen-year-old Li Juan sells flowers along Beijing's Saitan bar strip, a three-day train ride from her village outside Changping in China's southwest. Li's education ended two years ago when her father decided it

was time to send her to work at a long fireworks factory, a village enterprise in Minle, Gansu Province. Half were under-age workers. The survivors said they had never been given any work safety instruction. But for her tragic accident, he would gladly have continued at the pickle factory. It was early evening on Dec. 8, 1996, when, tired and hungry, she switched off the drier to take out the last batch of vegetables. However, the brake had failed and in a second her arm, clumsily sheathed in an adult-size glove, was crushed. When a doctor cut her thick sleeve to take an X-ray, Hu glimpsed bone sticking out of her arm and fainted. Her arm required three major

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## Bruised Flowers – China's hidden army of child laborers

Hu Changjun was desperate to escape the poverty trap in Wuxi county in southwest China's Sichuan province. She couldn't believe her luck when fellow villager Changyan offered her a job at a joint-venture factory in distant Beijing. "A joint venture means a foreign company where the work is easy and the pay is good" explained Changyan.

When the reality proved to be sixteen hour days, seven days a week, washing and drying vegetables for only 24 pounds a month, Hu was still keen to seize her urban dream. But less than a year after starting work, Hu caught her right arm in an industrial drier devoid of any safety mechanisms. The accident crippled her for life. She was just 13 years old.

Throughout China, millions of under-age workers like Hu endure slave-like and hazardous conditions toiling long hours for low pay. Many are migrants from the countryside exploited in China's headlong rush to capitalism. Labour laws prohibit employers from hiring workers under 16 years old, yet the benefits far outweigh the risk of fines between 3,000 to 5,000 yuan. "My boss said she likes to use young workers as we are cheap and don't make trouble" Hu remembers.

Amid her trauma, Hu's sole piece of good fortune was finding a lawyer to make trouble on her behalf. Their marathon court battle climaxed this month, turning a rare spotlight on a problem the Chinese government prefers to keep hidden. "I decided to offer Hu Changjun free legal aid the first time I saw her in hospital, so tiny, so helpless," recalls lawyer Zhang Yunzhang. "I also have a daughter, slightly younger, but all she knows is to ask me to take her to McDonalds, while Changjun already knew how to share the family burden."

The teenager's brutal introduction to China's 'socialist market economy' began in early 1996, when Changyan, a migrant who had 'made it' in Beijing, returned to spend Chinese New Year at her remote village. Hu needed little

persuasion to follow the older woman to China's capital. The year before, Hu's mother had given birth to a long anticipated baby boy, after which her father stopped Hu's schooling so she could help at home and spare the family purse.

Changyan, whom Hu addressed as 'elder sister', was on a mission to recruit cheap labour from the village. The joint venture, Beijing Jiye Food Limited, was not exactly what Hu had envisioned. The labour-intensive pickle factory belonged to a North Korean woman who had moved to Beijing, married a Chinese man and set up business in a compound rented from a farmer in the city's Chaoyang suburbs.

"I had dreamed of going to see Tiananmen Square, but I simply had no time" says Changjun. To meet the summer demand for cold noodles, a Korean specialty, Hu and a dozen other workers, mostly young girls, rose at five each morning and laboured past midnight. They lived and slept in the compound and were barred from stepping outside.

"Child labourers are mainly employed at small-sized rural and township enterprises where law enforcement is less strict" says May Wong of Asia Monitor Research Centre in Hong Kong, and author of a 1999 report on child labour in China. Over the past year, the issue of child labour has formed part of America's vociferous debate on China's future entry into the World Trade Organisation. The powerful union lobby in the US teamed with human rights activists to criticise China's poor record on labour conditions and work safety. Major investors like footwear giant Nike counter that their China presence actually helps curb such abuses, by requiring higher standards from their local partners.

Wong revealed that many factories forge identity cards for under-age workers or borrow them from older people, often with the help of employment agencies supplying labour to the coastal areas from the inland provinces. Factory bosses are adept at avoiding official inspections. When Wong and colleagues went undercover to Dongguan, in Guangdong province, she discovered twenty young women at the Tri-S toy factory were banned from the lunch canteen that day, for labour inspectors were due to visit.

"It may be impossible to wipe out the illegal practice," admits Wong. "But if the local authorities really want to discover infringements, there must be ways. You don't have to wait to deal with the issue only when an accident involving child labour occurs, such as child workers dying in a fire or explosion."

Government sensitivity towards child labour, combined with its covert nature, hinders accurate estimates of the size of the problem. In the regimented society that was Mao's China, child labour was not an issue. "Protection of children from being exploited is one of the historical legacies of socialist China," stresses Wong. China's impressive achievements in lowering infant mortality and improving nutrition, health care and education, rank among the best in the developing world.

Yet the problem *is* significant. China remains an important factor in a world child labour market estimated at 250 million by the International Labour Organization (ILO). A report compiled by the China Labour Bulletin in Hong Kong in 1995 estimated there were roughly 10 million child labourers throughout the country in 1993, judging from case studies and other information, such as the number of school 'drop outs'.

The Bulletin's authors admitted "the critical problem in addressing the problem in China is the lack of comprehensive statistics." In June 1996, the ILO reported that among 10-14 year old children in China, the percentage of working children was as high as 11.6 per cent, or 13.3 million children. Yet in the same year Beijing issued a white paper on the state of China's children which ignored the problem entirely.

Today, child labour remains a highly sensitive subject in a country now home to over 300 million children under the age of 16, or around one fifth of the total number of children worldwide. Officials contacted at the Ministry of Labour and Social Security claimed that no government figures are available because child labour "is not a

problem in China". In contrast to India, which welcomes foreign researchers and aid agencies to assist its 40 million to 100 million under-age workers, the Chinese government has repeatedly turned down offers of help from foreign NGOs.

The lack of reliable data makes it hard to say whether the exploitation of children is worsening in China. At the very least, Beijing now permits more media reports on the phenomenon, formerly a taboo topic. In May this year, the investigative programme 'In Focus' on China Central Television reported how children were kidnapped from Guizhou province in China's impoverished hinterland to work at factories in more prosperous Zhejiang. Exhausted children as young as 10 were shown assembling Christmas tree lights on a production line with dangerous wires hanging haphazardly. Despite working for many months, none had been paid. When asked if they missed home, all the children burst into tears. Now, all of the 84 kidnapped children have been rescued.

Coastal areas like Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong may be home to the worst abuses. At one of hundreds of private workshops in Fujian's Hui'an county, 14 year-old Ala was busy carving stone lions. On a nearby wall, a propaganda slogan declares "Strictly prohibit child labour!" as Ala expertly switches from electronic to manual chisels. "My dad said 'what's the point of studying? One has to work anyway.' Might as well start making money early." Ala's colleague is only 12. They both flee when a camera is produced, and the twenty-something owner appears with a guard dog.

The report on child labour by the China Labour Bulletin concluded that 'the existence of child workers is not a natural consequence of rural poverty'. Rather, the culprit is China's educational policy, whereby 'local governments have to raise their own funds in providing education.' Hou Wenzhuo, director of the Internal Migrants Legal Aid & Research Centre, a Beijing-based NGO, also blames the crisis on local education.

At the end of last year, Hou's centre conducted research sponsored by Oxfam into the plight of Beijing's flower children, who hawk their wares on popular bar streets. Many come from You county in central China's Hunan province. "In the county, at least 40% of children drop out from school after 10 years old," Hou explains. "It is increasingly expensive to send children to school and parents prefer to spend money on things like building houses rather than educating their kids".

Girls comprise a much higher percentage of drop-outs than boys as parents are reluctant to waste money on daughters who will be "married off" to other families. Thirteen year-old Li Juan sells flowers along Beijing's Sanlitun bar strip, a three day train ride from her village outside Chongqing in China's southwest. Li's education ended two years ago when her family decided they could no longer afford to support both her and her younger brother. She followed her aunt to Beijing, where her relative provides flowers, food and accommodation, and takes a large share of Li's income.

Early each evening, Li leaves home, just behind the western railway station, to linger around Sanlitun. She moves from bar to bar, targeting men with young ladies. By closing time around 3 am, the last bus has long gone. At five, she catches the first bus home and sleeps during the day. There are bad moments when Li is insulted by buyers, but overall "life in Beijing is more fun than at home," she says. "I even made a foreign friend who taught me to say 'excuse me, flower, beautiful flower'". When asked about her future, she admits "I want to save enough money to go home."

Li is lucky to work for her aunt. Most of her colleagues front for a 'flower boss' who leaves them only 200 yuan a month. Hou's centre interviewed over 30 flower children in Beijing, over 90% girls. Though many expressed interest in going back to school, only in one case did a boy successfully resume study.

"Often, they lose heart in studying; and schools usually do not welcome dropouts, particularly older kids. Selling flowers may not be the worst job for a child labourer, but some bad incidents did occur." Hou reveals that one boy

ran away after being tortured; another girl was forced to kneel on broken glass after she failed to sell her required quota. “And working overnight is bad for the growth of such young children.”

As hardships grow in rural China, Hou has witnessed a sharp rise in the number of children working in the cities. “Heavy taxes and low grain prices are driving more farmers to migrate to urban areas. To go to a state school, migrants have to pay expensive fees few can afford. As a result, many migrant children end up working.” Hu calls on all state schools to open their doors to poorer siblings from the country.

Apart from selling flowers, children are hired to clean cars, beg or work for relatives. “In this kind of informal work relationship, it is difficult to guarantee the children’s rights” says Hou. Hu Changjun was ignorant even of term ‘child labour’. “I didn’t think there was anything wrong in using child labourers. I always helped with the farming work at home. Many of my classmates have gone to work at toy factories in Shenzhen.”

Experts like Hou Wenzhuo see clearly what’s wrong. “Using child labour has become so widespread and so serious. Given China is a poor country, many children help out at home one way or another. What is worse is that under-age workers often slave under hazardous working conditions.” In August last year, 14 people died in explosions at the Yipinhong firecracker factory, a village enterprise in Minle, Gansu province. Half were under aged workers. The survivors said they had never received any work safety instruction.

Bur for her tragic accident, Hu Changjun would gladly have continued at the pickle factory. It was early evening on December 6, 1996, when Hu, tired and hungry, switched off the drier to extract the last bunch of vegetables. However, the brake had failed and in a second Hu’s arm, clumsily sheathed in an adult-sized glove, was crushed. When a doctor cut her thick sleeves for an X-ray, Hu glimpsed bone sticking out of her arm and fainted.

To keep her arm, three major operations were required costing tens of thousands of yuan. After the initial 10,000 yuan deposit was exhausted, the North Korean boss refused to pay more and soon refused to admit Hu had ever worked for her at all. Lawyer Zhang Yunzhang, who had chanced on the case after a friend’s casual mention, needed all his experience.

To sue the pickle firm for using child labor would result in fines for both the firm and Hu’s parents, after which Hu herself would be sent back home. Zhang decided to sue for industrial injury. Thus began a three year legal tussle. In April, 1997, the district labour arbitration committee ordered the firm to pay urgent medical fees and part of Hu’s salary. In November 1998, the arbitration court, urged by Zhang, ordered the firm to pay Hu a final settlement of 300,000 yuan, including medical care, injury compensation and some salary.

Unhappy with the verdict, the pickle factory sued the district labour bureau for issuing a certificate of industrial injury. The Korean boss argued that Hu Changjun had never worked there. Hu could summon no one who would dare act as her witness. Her so-called sister Changyan, fiancée of the boss nephew- in-law, had moved to another city. All the other under-age workers had been dismissed after the accident.

On June 14, this year, the day before the court’s final verdict, Changjun waited nervously in ramshackle rented accommodation in Beijing. Three years after her accident, she has blossomed into a pretty girl. She wears a special sleeve to cover her deformed arm. “If I lose this time, I’m not sure I’ll have the courage to live again!” she says, tears filling her eyes.

When the good news finally came, lawyer Zhang laughed aloud. “It shows the government wants to protect children’s rights. But I can’t relax until I see the money from the pickle firm.” Hu giggled over the phone, expressing her gratitude to lawyer Zhang. “Without him, I don’t know what would have become of me.”

Although Hu’s case has garnered some publicity, notably for the success of legal aid in winning her fight, it is unlikely to prove a watershed victory for under-age workers in China. Without better law enforcement,

independent trade unions and cheaper education, the economic arguments for exploiting child labour remain overwhelming. A freer press is beginning to expose abuses, but most of China's young victims have no lawyer Zhang to protect and enforce their rights.

When Hu eventually receives her damages, the first priority is treating her arm. "But with the rest, I want to support my brother and sister to finish their education so that they will never become child labourers like me!"

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